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BOOK REVIEW

Alma Harris and Michelle S. Jones (Eds.), Leading Futures: Global Perspectives on Educational Leadership, Sage India, 2015, 288 pp., INR 750.00.

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Leading Futures: Global Perspectives on Educational Leadership, edited by Alma Harris and Michelle S Jones, is a collection of 16 essays that discuss the role of leadership in effecting fundamental educational reforms to enhance the performance of students and school systems. The book originates from the seven system leadership study (7SLS) which is a comparative analysis of the approach to leadership development in various education systems—Australia, Malaysia, England, Singapore, Hong Kong, Russia, and Indonesia. Many of the contributors are associated with the study as expert advisors. However, this book is not a presentation of the empirical findings from the study; rather, it offers the reader a set of contemporary perspectives on the role of leadership in education systems loosely organised into three levels—system level, professional development level, and leader and learner level.

The positive association between educational attainment and economic development has led to the growing prominence of international benchmark studies such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) in education policy among others. As a result, there is unrelenting pressure on governments to ensure better student achievements on these international large-scale assessment studies (LSAs), and this is unlikely to abate soon. The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) has emphasised market-based competition among schools, with increasing parental choice, standardisation with a focus on literacy and numeracy, and meaningful accountability for the schools and teachers for the performance of the students as measured by standardised testing. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in the United States of 2002 has been a step in this direction although the US Congress stripped the Act of its national character and turned over its remnants to the states as Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

It is interesting to note that the education systems that have adopted external accountability and standardisation as ways to improve performance have not yet seen sustainable outcomes (USA and/or UK) while some systems that have not, are reporting better performance in the international large-scale assessment studies (Finland, for instance.) (Sahlberg, 2007). There is also growing criticism of standardised testing as a measure of performance as it negates the opportunity to customise curriculum and pedagogy and environmental variation, and encourages "teaching to tests" as opposed to "teaching for learning" (Herman & Golan, 1993; Lomax, West, Harmon, Viator, & Madaus, 1995).

The skills that education systems need to impart to its pupils now and for the future are vastly different from those that were relevant in the past century. Progress in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has been rapid over the last few decades, and students communicate and engage with their surroundings today in ways that were unthinkable in the past. While there is cognition and acceptance of the need for fundamental reform in education, most education systems have not kept pace, even while investments in public education systems have gone up. Most school systems cling to the educational practices and pedagogy from decades ago, and increased spending per student does not seem to be the answer. Hanushek (1996) notes that "…variations in resources devoted to schooling are not the primary factor determining student performance", and that "…aggressive spending programs are unlikely to be good investment programs unless coupled with other fundamental reforms". Kremer (2003) presents a review of randomised evaluations of interventions in education in developing countries, and notes that "…many programs fail". Publication bias may be substantial in that only interventions leading to positive and significant results may be reported, and failure rates of programmes may be higher than what is observed.

Janet H Chrispeels, Professor Emeritus of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego discusses the fundamental question of why so many reform efforts underperform or fail outright (discussed in Chapter 2). Policy formulation is essentially a political process, while implementation is at the local or provincial level by education administrators and teachers, who may or may not agree with or understand the policy completely. Leadership can bridge this crucial gap between policy intent and policy implementation while making sure the goals of the system align with those of its participants. Local, cultural and political contexts shape the possibilities of leadership preparation as many of the policies are politically driven rather than by educational requirements.

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System level

The lessons from successful school reform policies seem to be that they are coherent and address the three key aspects of education directly—curriculum, assessment, and professional development; and that they emerge at all levels—policy maker, local administrator, and school. The successful reforms provide respect, resources, and autonomy to schools and teachers, engage educators and co-create policy, and are heavily dependent on the culture and the history of the existing system.

Professional level

The role of school leadership, specifically that of the Principal, in student achievement is well established (Hallinger & Heck, 1998), and school systems are investing in developing the capacities of the Principals and adopting Principal Certification standards. It is interesting to note that collaborative networks formed between schools for the purpose of assisting the disadvantaged schools have reportedly shown a positive effect in two very different contexts—in England as presented by Christopher Chapman (in Chapter 10) and in Russia as presented by Kosaretsky et al. (in Chapter 11.). Both chapters present leadership as the key factor in determining the positive effects of collaboration, but the definition and identification of leadership in the two contexts are not clarified and are likely to be different.

Leader and learner level

Karen Edge explores who the new leader is, what motivates new leaders, and what their aspirations and goals are (in Chapter 13). They are younger, comfortable with technology and responsibility, open to new ideas, and less likely to continue in the long term as education leaders. Most of the current research on the role of school principals is based on the previous generation, and the young leaders might require a different approach to support their recruitment, retention, and career progression.

This collection of essays offers accounts of educational reforms from countries that include developing and advanced economies, and offers a comparative perspective on the interventions that have already been attempted. The strength of the work lies in its presentation of leadership perspectives and practices from Asia as well as parts of the OECD. However, it would not be appropriate to generalise any finding as universally applicable, and the authors too do not claim so. As this is an attempt to assemble comparative perspectives without presentation of the empirical findings, the authors do not provide prescriptions to practitioners, but rather provide a narrative of the cases discussed. The essays raise pertinent questions about the role of leadership and present plausible hypotheses, while not adequately arriving at answers.

Overall, the book is an interesting read for someone seeking a preliminary discussion of the leadership and reform challenges in school education.

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